



PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUTS

Chickenpox (Varicella)

Topic Overview

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a common illness that causes an itchy rash and red spots or blisters (pox) all over the body. It is most common in children, but most people will get chickenpox at some point in their lives if they have not had the chickenpox vaccine.

Chickenpox usually isn't serious in healthy children. But it can cause problems for pregnant women, newborns, teens and adults, and people who have [immune system problems](#) that make it hard for the body to fight infection.

After you have had chickenpox, you are not likely to get it again. But the virus stays in your body long after you get over the illness. If the virus becomes active again, it can cause a painful viral infection called [shingles](#).


What causes chickenpox, and how is it spread?

Chickenpox is caused by the varicella-zoster virus. It can spread easily. You can get it from an infected person who sneezes, coughs, or shares food or drinks. You can also get it if you touch the fluid from a chickenpox blister.

A person who has chickenpox can spread the virus even before he or she has any symptoms. Chickenpox is most easily spread from 2 to 3 days before the rash appears until all the blisters have crusted over.

You are at risk for chickenpox if you have never had the illness and have not had the chickenpox vaccine. If someone you live with gets chickenpox, your risk is even higher because of the close contact.

What are the symptoms?

The first symptoms of chickenpox often are a fever, a headache, and a sore throat. You or your child may feel sick, tired, and not very hungry. The [chickenpox rash](#)  usually appears about 1 or 2 days after the first symptoms start. Some children get the chickenpox rash without having a fever or other early symptoms.

It usually takes 14 to 16 days to get the symptoms of chickenpox after you have been around someone with the virus. This is called the incubation period.

After a chickenpox red spot appears, it usually takes about 1 or 2 days for the spot to go through all its

stages. This includes blistering, bursting, drying, and crusting over. New red spots will appear every day for up to 5 to 7 days.

You or your child can go back to work, school, or day care when all blisters have crusted over. This is usually about 10 days after the first symptoms start.

Other illnesses can have symptoms like those of chickenpox. For this reason, you may think you have had chickenpox twice when instead you have had two different infections.

How is chickenpox diagnosed?

Your doctor will ask you about your symptoms and will examine you. This usually gives your doctor enough information to find out if you have chickenpox.

Healthy children with chickenpox symptoms may not need to visit a doctor. You may be able to describe your child's symptoms to the doctor over the phone. Then your child won't have to leave the house and risk spreading the virus to others. But it is important to check with your doctor to find out if he or she wants to see your child.

Teenagers, adults, pregnant women, and people with health problems need to see a doctor for chickenpox. This is especially important for pregnant women, since chickenpox during early pregnancy can cause birth defects. Call first to make an appointment and to discuss whether you need to take any steps to avoid spreading the virus when you arrive. For example, office staff may take you straight to an exam room, rather than have you wait in the lobby.

How is it treated?

Most healthy children and adults need only home treatment for chickenpox. Home treatment includes resting and taking medicines to reduce fever and itching. You also can soak in oatmeal baths to help with itching.

People with long-term diseases or other health problems may need more treatment for chickenpox. They may need [immunoglobulin](#) treatment (IG) or antiviral medicine. Your doctor can give you these soon after you are exposed to the virus to help you feel better sooner.

How can you prevent chickenpox?

You can prevent chickenpox by getting the [chickenpox \(varicella\) vaccine](#). Doctors recommend two doses of this shot for most children 12 months of age and older who have not had chickenpox. Older children and adults who have not had chickenpox and have not yet had the vaccine can also get the shot.

Most children do not have a reaction from the vaccine. But if your child has a serious or long-term illness, talk to your doctor about whether your child should have the vaccine. These children may have a bad reaction from the vaccine.

If you have been around a person who has the virus and you have not had chickenpox or the vaccine, you still may be able to prevent the illness. Get a shot of chickenpox antibodies or the vaccine right away.

Rarely, people who have had the vaccine still get chickenpox. This is called a breakthrough infection. If this happens, you will probably get a milder form of the virus, with fewer blisters and symptoms.

Do not expose your child to chickenpox on purpose. Some parents expose their children to chickenpox

because they think it is safer for children to have the illness when they are young. But this isn't a good idea, because even young children can have serious problems from chickenpox.

Frequently Asked Questions

Learning about chickenpox:

- [What is chickenpox?](#)
- [What are the symptoms of chickenpox, and how long do they last?](#)
- [How long is a person with chickenpox contagious?](#)
- [Can a person get chickenpox more than once?](#)

Being diagnosed:

- [When do I or my child need to see a doctor for chickenpox?](#)
- [What questions will my doctor ask about chickenpox symptoms?](#)
- [What signs of chickenpox will my doctor look for?](#)
- [What if I'm not sure whether I've ever had chickenpox?](#)
- [Are there other illnesses with symptoms similar to chickenpox?](#)


Getting treatment:

- [What is the treatment for chickenpox?](#)
- [Are there any medicines that can help treat chickenpox?](#)

Ongoing concerns:

- [How effective is the vaccine to prevent chickenpox?](#)
- [Is there anyone who shouldn't get the chickenpox vaccine?](#)
- [What happens if I am pregnant and get chickenpox?](#)
- [What other problems can chickenpox cause?](#)

Taking care of yourself:

- [What can I do to prevent chickenpox from spreading?](#)
-  [How can I control itching from the chickenpox rash and prevent a skin infection?](#)
- [How can I lower a fever from chickenpox?](#)

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